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Indigenous Language Recognition in Northern Ireland: Identity, Memory and Politics

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ABSTRACT

The path of indigenous language recognition in post-conflict Northern Ireland is paved with bitter contestation and complex constructions and reconstructions of identities. Two decades have passed since the ratification of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 1998, yet agents seeking recognition of Irish and Ulster-Scots in the public sphere must continually grapple with the role of memory and conflict in their actions. Nuanced and intricate reasonings of individuals seeking recognition of indigenous languages are lost within wider political disputes. And as an urgent indicator of the deeply fractious nature of language recognition in Northern Ireland, dispute over the instatement of an Irish Language Act is has halted restoration of a working government for over two years.

Languages in Northern Ireland cannot be separated from their political, cultural and social histories, particularly as such histories are divergently represented through the narratives of different actors. Yet interpretations of history, oppression and language identities, whilst being constantly reframed in current spheres of academic thought, have contributed immensely to stereotypes of indigenous language speakers in Northern Ireland. Such prejudices and contestations have determined that any advancements in legislation which institutionalise language recognition are incredibly gradual processes that often stagnate, as the thorough politicisation of language identities spark and reawaken tense discourse on the nature of British, Irish and Northern Irish identities. The 'parity of esteem' principle in Northern Ireland, whilst an interminable facet of equality protection provided through the peace agreement, has generated novel and arduous dilemmas for indigenous language recognition. Absolute equality is difficult to define and legislate for where the needs and concerns of one community are not paralleled by others, and is furthermore challenging in a region where recognition of one group is often perceived as exclusion of another.

Keywords: *Memory, Conflict, Indigenous Language Recognition, Northern Ireland, Linguistic Identities*

Biographical Data

The author is a PhD researcher at Ulster University, whose thesis involves an investigation into the role of indigenous language advocacy groups in post-conflict European societies. The themes of her research include memory, language advocacy and peace and reconciliation.